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6. — *Studies in English; or, Glimpses of the Inner Life of our Language*. By M. SCHELE DE VERE, LL. D., Professor of Modern Languages in the University of Virginia. New York: Charles Scribner and Company. 1867. 12mo. pp. vi., 365.

THE author of this work is best known to our literary community by a little volume entitled "Outlines of Comparative Philology," which he published in 1853, with the intent to bring before a wider circle of American students the general facts and principles, then not easily accessible, of the new science of language. The publication was a timely one, and, we doubt not, serviceable to the progress of philological study. He has now, as it may be conjectured, made use, in part, of the enforced leisure procured him by a state of affairs unfavorable to the active work of a University teacher, to continue his special studies in language, giving them a more determinate direction toward our own tongue; and he hastens, the moment that the embargo of war is taken off, to send abroad his new literary venture. The book deserves to be gratefully received and kindly judged; it will furnish its readers not a little entertainment and edification, and help to promote an interest in the general subject of which it treats.

But, saying this, we should be doing injustice to our readers if we failed to point out, at the same time, that these *Studies in English* are not in all points to be implicitly trusted as sound, thorough, and authoritative. To strictness of plan and scientific method, indeed, the work makes no pretence; it is a collection of somewhat desultory remarks, etymologies, and expositions, grouped together under certain leading ideas, rather than classified. We are, therefore, entitled to demand from it only the minor virtue of accuracy. Even here, however, it is not seldom found wanting. While the bulk of its word-genealogies are unexceptionable, it presents many which are of a very different character. We cite, as conspicuous examples, its derivation of the numeral *ten* from the Anglo-Saxon verb *tynan*, 'to close' (pp. 105, 261); of *brother* from *brood* (p. 148); of *sister* from *swain-ster* (p. 152); of *I* and *thou* from *one* and *two* (p. 241); of *he*, *her*, *hit* (Anglo-Saxon for 'he, she, it') from the verb *hætan*, 'to call' (p. 245); of *more* and *most* from the verb *to mow*, because "what was mown made a little heap" (p. 231); and of *to* as sign of the infinitive from the verb *do* (p. 282). This last, especially, is an error which it passes our comprehension how any modern philologist should be able to commit. In nearly all his etymologies of affixes, our author is eminently unsuccessful. Thus, he gets the *er* of such words as *lov-er* from the Anglo-Saxon noun *wer*, 'man' (p. 146); the *some* of *handsome*, etc. from *sum*, 'quantity,' which is of Latin deri-

vation (p. 226); the *y* of *leaf-y* (German *ig*, Latin *icus*, Greek *ikos*) from the (Greek and Latin) verb *ago* (p. 223); the endings of comparison, *er* and *est*, from *ere*, 'earlier,' and *erst*, 'earliest' (p. 230); *an* of the Anglo-Saxon infinitive (German *en*), from *agan*, 'to own' (p. 280).

Among errors of a more general theoretical character may be instanced the following. The distinction of grammatical gender, we are told (p. 186), belongs either to childish nations, like the Algonquins, or to such as are troubled with a redundant fancy, like the Germans; while the English, who, "as a people, are no longer children, nor endowed with unnatural liveliness of imagination, . . . have abandoned gender as they approached maturity." Something of the native German fantasy, not yet fully worked out, is to be seen, we think, in this explanation. It is rather hard upon the Germans to make them personally responsible for that artificial distinction of masculines, feminines, and neuters, which was part of the original sin of the Indo-European family, and which they have simply inherited and perpetuated, in company with most of the other peoples who speak Indo-European tongues. Nor is our abandonment of this department of grammar to be credited to any peculiarly philosophic spirit in us, the English-speaking people, but rather to that sweeping obliteration of formal distinctions which attended the growth of our language out of its Saxon and Norman elements. Again, *its* is said (p. 251) to have been wanting in Old English, "because, as soon as a thing was regarded as the possessor of another thing, it became to that extent personified, and the personal pronouns *his* and *her* were employed." It seems as if our author must have taken this explanation from Dean Alford, among whose many blunders it is one of the more striking.* An Anglo-Saxon scholar and teacher like Professor Schele de Vere certainly ought to know that the reason for the use of *his* instead of *its* in early English is purely an historical one, *his* having been in Anglo-Saxon the regular genitive case of both *he* and *hit* (our *it*). Once more, our author appears (p. 319) to assent to a charge brought against us by Max Müller, (certainly without any sufficient reason,) to the effect that the use of *very* in place of *much* before a participle — as in "he is *very* pleased," "they are *very* mistaken" — is an Americanism; and he ascribes the inaccuracy to a highly recondite and metaphysical cause; — the Englishman's tendency, namely, is to worship wealth, abundance, as indicated by *much*; while the American rather admires power, vigor, signified by *very*!

Another inaccuracy which, from being a mere Hibernicism or South-ernism (pardon the word), is threatening to become an Americanism,

* See North American Review, Vol. CIII. p. 566, for October, 1866.

so fast is it spreading through all classes of all sections of our country, — we mean the use of *will* and *would* in the first person, instead of *shall* or *should*, — is well remarked upon by our author (p. 307); but his practice is not quite level with his theory. We note a number of instances in the volume where the true idiom is violated. Thus (p. 17), we read, “we *would* err grievously, however, if we were to conclude”; again (p. 140), “if we go back . . . we *will* there find”; — and so on. Perhaps Professor Schele de Vere’s proof-reader is to blame here more than he himself. We refer to the case because it ought to be a warning to us, and an incitement to new and more vigorous fight against this insidious corruption, to find its effects even showing themselves in a treatise on the English language by an eminent philological scholar.

Much of what M. Schele de Vere says respecting the question of phonetic spelling is well judged and good; but it is difficult to understand how he should have allowed himself to make such assertions as (pp. 65, 66) that, if the form of our words “were to follow the sound, there would soon not a single trace be left of the language used by our forefathers”; and that, if people had begun a thousand years ago to spell as they pronounced, “nobody would have had either the courage or the time to attempt mastering the history of our language.” We have seen such statements put forth by English reviewers, bent on ridiculing and frowning down the phonetic movement, and have thought them not out of place; but we did not expect to find the echo of them in this book, and we feel sure that its author will retract them with somewhat of regret, if not of shame, on sober second-thought. They are too absolutely groundless to deserve a serious refutation. The integrity of English speech and the possibility of English etymologizing are no more dependent on our so-called (and miscalled) “historic spelling,” than the integrity of the British Constitution on the exclusion of Jews from Parliament, or the possibility of American culture on the slavery of the negro.

Our author allows his somewhat exaggerated reverence for Max Müller’s authority to lead him into error, when he tells us (p. 8) that, outside of China, Africa, and America, “there are in the whole kingdom of speech but three grammatical families, to which every known dialect can be referred with unerring certainty,” — the three being the Semitic, Indo-European (“Aryan”), and “Turanian.” There has hardly been a greater disservice rendered to the science of linguistic ethnology in a long time past, than the introduction into it by Bunsen and Müller of the term “Turanian,” and the classification which it represents, — a true classification of ignorance, the “Turanian” family

being the *barathrum* into which are tumbled all languages of which the classifier does not know enough to distinguish them from one another by characteristic qualities.

It would puzzle a student of final causes, we imagine, to point out the possible "good purpose" for which a wise Providence has concealed from our eye the first origin of language (p. 8). The concealment is of that same mysterious kind which hides from the grown-up man all memory and consciousness of the processes by which, when an infant, he first gained command of his hands and feet. Some may claim, indeed, that it consists merely in the oblivion of what happened so long ago, and that no more real mystery envelops the beginnings of human speech than those of the other departments of human culture; and in this prosaic, not to say materialistic, school we must confess that we are inclined to rank ourselves.

The very first sentence of the book strikes a tone which rings on more or less distinctly to its close, and always, or almost always, jars upon our ear: "The youngest of all European idioms, our great and noble language has yet spread farthest over the globe, and now rules the world without a rival." The disposition to exalt without stint, in loose and swelling phrase, our native language, as the most wonderful and truly perfect of all human tongues, is what we cannot help taking objection to. Both the assertions of this sentence, its claim of unexcelled youth, and of unrivalled sovereignty, need a great deal of limitation and explanation before they can be accepted as true. Predilection for one's mother-tongue is one of the most ancient, universal, and obstinate of human prejudices, national or individual; and a philologist, who has had occasion to learn that different tongues have different advantages, no one idiom combining them all, ought to err, if anywhere, on the side of a cautious abstinence from pandering to this popular prejudice by wholesale praise. We will not yield to Professor De Vere in a heartfelt appreciation and admiration of the English language; but, at the same time, we feel that in his extolment of it there is rank adulation, and marked injustice to other tongues. Our faith in the solid excellence, the beautiful culture, and the indefinite adaptability of the English is so strong, that we are not in the least anxious to claim every one of its peculiar features as an inimitable perfection, or afraid to allow the superiority of many a foreign tongue in this or that respect. There is not a cultivated language on the earth which might not be praised as unqualifiedly by one of its writers as is our own by Professor De Vere, amid the general and lively applause of those to whom it is native; and the philologist should beware how he seem to place himself in the position of those British table-orators who, it is said, when

not sure of the interest and sympathy of their hearers, manage to bring in allusions to the Queen and the royal family, in order that the glow of feeling and the applause which such allusions always draw forth from the ready loyalty of the Briton may tend to put speaker and audience on good terms with one another.

We will direct attention to only a single other point in regard to which our author shows a less degree of caution than would have been desirable. He enters not infrequently into detailed exposition of the process by which the Saxon and Norman idioms were fused together, and the new English speech elaborated; and he does this with a degree of ready confidence which could hardly be greater if he had lived through the whole period of transition, and been present in the thousands of homes, neighborhoods, and communities in which the work was accomplished. Now the problem is one of the most difficult and obscure of those which lie before the linguistic student for solution. Even the ordinary and normal processes of linguistic life are so hidden from sight, are dependent upon the joint and mutual workings of such an infinity of individual forces, that we have to be in the main content with recording their effects, and setting forth the general laws which they illustrate. And when the linguist has to deal with a case so exceptional as that presented by the English in the period of its rapid grammatical disintegration, and its infusion with new and foreign material, when he has a true revolution in language to account for, he is urged also to exceptional modesty and self-distrust. We are sure that those who have studied the subject most earnestly and deeply will be the most backward in claiming that its intricacies lie open to their comprehension. Our author takes the matter quite too easily; nothing daunts or puzzles him; he has a facile answer ready for every question that arises. But he not only fails to win us to confidence in the views he presents; we cannot even feel that he contributes anything appreciable to the general understanding of the subject; we distrust his method, and fail to see a necessary connection between the conditions he describes and the results claimed to follow from them.

We fear, however, that the length, unexpected to ourselves, to which our remarks and criticism have been extended, may give the impression of a more unfavorable judgment than we have any intention of passing upon the book as a whole. We highly respect and value Professor Schele de Vere's exertions in the cause of philology, and hope that, both in the seat of learning which is the scene of his personal labors, and before the general public whom he addresses through his books, he will long continue to stand forth as an inciter and guide to wider and profounder studies in English.